



USDA Forest Service Connecting Kids in the Woods to Wilderness Briefing Paper

“Our most important resource in this country is not forests, vital as they are. It is not water, although life itself would cease to exist without it. It is people. The challenges of climate change and looming water shortages will not be resolved in a few years. It will take generations. Today’s children—and theirs—will need to be able to take the baton and continue the race. For that, they will need a full understanding of why forests are so valuable, along with a strong land ethic. It is our job to give them both.”

— **Forest Service Chief Gail Kimbell**

Wilderness provides unique opportunities to re-connect kids (and communities) to the national forests.

- The National Wilderness Preservation System, with over 35 million acres of designated wilderness within the national forests, offers abundant opportunities for children to reconnect with nature away from the distracting influences of technology, to experience the solitude of open spaces, and to overcome challenge and risk to build self-reliance.
- Children who have direct experience with these wild places develop life-long ties that allow them to see the effects life-style choices have on places they love. Consequently, they are more likely to be informed citizens who understand and support conservation and wilderness.
- Respect and care for wild lands is taught through wilderness education programs. Examples include projects funded with “More Kids in the Woods” grants, partnerships with outfitters who provide backcountry educational experiences to underserved urban youth, and conservation education/wilderness education positions within the agency.

There are a number of important opportunities for expanding the role of wilderness in connecting kids to the woods.

- Identify opportunities and integrate wilderness into the broader Kids in the Woods emphasis area strategies, briefing papers, and program implementation.
 - Insert wilderness needs and actions lists into all program planning and products
 - Improve the Kids in the Woods webpage wilderness section
- Continue the “More Kids in the Woods” grant programs with an emphasis to include wilderness awareness and ethics education along with service projects. Insure awareness of grant program among wilderness managers and educators
- Develop strategies to encourage new and existing outfitters whose mission is to provide backcountry educational experiences to underserved youth
 - Emphasize need and highlight partnership options with outfitter/guides.
 - Provide national guidance to prioritize authorizations of use days.

- Prioritize wilderness education as part of the conservation education program.
 - Utilize existing and new partners to teach respect and care for wild places.
 - Integrate wilderness education into conservation education strategy and programs.

Background

The passage of the Wilderness Act was intended by Congress to “secure for present and future generations the benefits of an enduring resource of wilderness”. The legacy of that shared vision today supplies benefits more complex than those imagined in 1964. For generations, American children grew up with the outdoors a key part of their lives and had a visceral understanding of the connection between forests and their homes and communities. With the demographic shift from rural to urban living and today’s unprecedented use of technologies such as televisions and computers, our children have become increasingly disconnected from nature. For land managers, concern about this disconnect relates to the 'extinction of experience' (Pyle - 1993), an apathy towards environmental concern at the same time public lands are being affected by climatic changes that require massive conservation efforts.

Support for conservation of public lands is based on people having a social connection to “place”. The National Wilderness Preservation System, with over 35 million acres of designated wilderness within the national forests, offers abundant opportunities for children to reconnect with nature away from the distracting influences of technology, to experience the solitude of open spaces, and to overcome challenge and risk to build self-reliance. Children who have direct experience with these wild places develop life-long ties that allow them to see the affects life-style choices have on places they love: to make the link between climate change and increased fire activity or population growth and increased recreational impacts. That direct experience combined with on-going environmental education programs produces informed citizens who support conservation and wilderness.

Education programs have traditionally been a key focus of wilderness stewardship. Efforts such as Pack-It-In, Pack-It-Out and Leave-No-Trace have reduced the recreation impacts of an increasing visitor population. Countless other programs have targeted local school children in an attempt to promote a wilderness ethic, helping them understand the value of wild places in their back-yards and how wilderness management differs from that of other public lands. However, 75% of wilderness is located in western, often less-populated states and these programs regularly miss our more culturally diverse urban youth.

Through a challenge cost-share program called “More Kids in the Woods,” the Forest Service is contributing to a growing national movement to bring kids to nature—and nature to kids. In 2008 16 “More Kids in the Woods” projects were granted funds. Many of these programs included wilderness education and visits to wilderness areas. Diverse partnerships spanning the country were developed including public schools in Colorado, Montana, Atlanta, California, Ohio and Arizona; the New York City Housing Authority, Big Brothers Big Sisters of Ohio and others. Relationships started through

these grants need to be encouraged to continue; and new partnerships need to be funded in the future.

Children also gain direct experiences with nature and wilderness through our many outfitting and guiding partners. Collaboration with partners such as Big City Mountaineers or Montana Yellowstone Expeditions, who provide scholarship funded outdoor learning opportunities to urban youth, allows participants to spend time learning about themselves and nature in a backcountry setting. Expanding our capacity to be mentors to these partners concerning wilderness ethics and the value of wild places will help ensure that future generations value nature and support conservation.

Opportunities to reconnect children to nature will require will require careful monitoring, to assess the effectiveness of programs and the potential for negative consequences such as loss of solitude, increased campsite impacts or spread of noxious weeds. It is important that the movement to reconnect children to wilderness take advantage of existing and new opportunities through coordination with local managers to avoid causing impacts that could result in the need for more restrictions in order to protect wilderness character.

These three elements involved in reconnecting children to nature – direct experience to build attachment to “place”, expanding education partners to reach a diverse urban and rural population and the need for monitoring to protect wild places – logically require an effective wilderness field program. Contacts made by wilderness rangers in and out of wilderness will continue to play a beneficial and cost-effective role in building positive connections between children and nature. Wilderness rangers will also continue to be the front-line in development of service projects and monitoring the effectiveness of these efforts.

Finally, sharing a love of wild places becomes a two-way exchange – mentoring future stewards will lead to a better understanding of the evolving role wilderness plays in a rapidly changing society.